

Viewpoint B

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Part 1

It was snowing the day Ai died. I'm pretty sure of that, even if my actual recollection of it is sketchy at best.

Then again... that was the day of the Dome concert, and despite the crowd swarming the venue, not a single umbrella was in sight. And now that I think about it, there was a heavy snowfall just before Ai's funeral. It unleashed massive traffic snarls and added to my woes as I searched for appropriate mourning attire.

Truth be told, it probably wasn't really snowing that day Ai died but we humans have a knack for abstraction. With time, our true memories fade into the tapestries we've woven for ourselves and our brains gradually begin to accept these mental images as the unvarnished truth.

So many years have drifted by that the events of that day have turned into delicate imprints on my mind, rather than vivid recollections.

Even so, what happened on that day fifteen years ago – Ai's death – marked the first time that snow fell upon the world.

That's how it felt to me.

Slipping into my Dior coat, I couldn't help but chuckle at how unfashionable it seemed.

I'd decided to go to a convenience store to pick up some food, but caught wind that the day's chill had been amped up by a sudden cold snap. Almost on autopilot, I dug out an old splurge from the closet – a pricey coat from a decade back meant to broadcast my style prowess. But now, the mustard-coloured trench coat was just uncomfortable thanks to the texture of the material.

From underneath, a rigid, worn gray sweatshirt poked out as did my light blue socks. The combo of my comfort-first loungewear and the swanky coat turned out to be a worse mismatch

than anticipated and I ended up tossing the coat onto a chair in the living room and hooking my feet into a pair of ill-fitting Adidas sandals left behind by a guy I used to live with.

"It'll do, I guess."

The convenience store is a three-minute walk away. There's no point in getting dressed up for it.

I slipped on the mask that was hanging by the door, just to hide my face, and then double-locked the apartment door – top and bottom. At this point, it's basically an ingrained instinct.

You can never be too careful.

As I passed through the auto lock door, a crosswind blew in and I involuntarily clenched my teeth. The December wind made my already tiny body shrink in on itself and my legs pick up speed on the way to the convenience store.

At a traffic light on the way there, I ended up side by side with a man who looked to be a university student. I did my best not to look at him and when the traffic light turned green, I hung back for a second. If I took the lead, his eyes would be on my back all the way to the convenience store and the thought of it left me distinctly uneasy. Though my lined sweatshirt provided some warmth, the winter wind relentlessly stung at my neck and I was acutely aware that the human gaze could pierce far deeper and more fiercely than the icy gusts.

I trailed behind the man, moving at roughly half my regular pace.

The convenience store, which would have been a quick stroll if I had hurried, now appeared dishearteningly far off. My heart sank a bit.

"Maybe I should've worn my coat after all."

Maybe it would've been smarter for my sanity to step out with some decent clothes on, instead of traipsing along feeling like I'm up to no good? I felt a pang of delayed regret. But if the whole situation replays next month, you can bet I'll still be wearing this worn-out sweatshirt on my way to the convenience store. I can practically guarantee that.

My way of thinking has sort of rusted over time, and a touch of sentimentality isn't really going to do much at this point.

At 35, I'm pretty set in my ways.

Everything's shifted from the days when I was in the limelight as an idol.

Seventeen years ago.

Back then I belonged to an idol group called 'B-Komachi', and there was a time when we were very successful in our own right. I stood in the spotlight, embodying youth, soaking up the applause and envy from those around me. At that time, I paid much more attention to how I looked, more so than I do now. Being more stylish than the rest was high up on my list. I was the sort who'd really laugh – from the heart – at anyone who missed the mark. As far as I was concerned, being cute and pretty took precedence over pretty much everything else.

In the entertainment industry, looks are everything.

For women, their worth is often measured by their looks – a beauty scale dictating opportunities and roles. This goes unchecked, and everyone acts like it's perfectly natural. Look good. Be beautiful. It's only when you step out into the real world that you begin to grasp the madness of it all.

It's utterly absurd that a woman's worth is often tethered to her appearance. Imagine if such a scenario played out in a regular workplace – it would undoubtedly spark a massive outcry, triggering allegations of harassment and a flurry of compliance concerns.

Yet, the grip of such superficial judgment remains potent, because we're often treated as commodities. Looks are specifications, education is a necessity. Hairstyles are different flavours and fashion serves as the wrapping. Keeping the product tidy and presentable is essentially the bare minimum expected from the seller. If a bag of chips arrived with its back ripped open, it's only natural you'd send it back with a complaint.

When was it I started to resent that world?

I'd yearned for it, poured my heart into it, chased after the dream of being an idol.

Back in those audition days, my passion boiled like molten lava. But with time, those fervent emotions cooled and I was left with a heavy rock lodged in my chest.

So in the winter of my 24th year, I left.

I just wanted to do something other than being an idol. That was my only prerequisite for giving it a shot. I dabbled in modeling for a bit, hoping to kindle a new passion. My one advantage: a face that was slightly above average. That was my lone edge. I didn't even bother with acting. I'd once taken acting lessons on the recommendation of my agency, but I was so busy with the job at hand that I ended up taking only the first few lessons and never even showed up after that.

Fresh out of the group, my old connection to 'B-Komachi' still opened a few doors. However, I wasn't exactly a standout member and I was lacking the arsenal to compete in the talent pool. Gigs started thinning out, and just as making ends meet turned into a battle, the curtains fell on 'B-Komachi' itself.

In the aftermath, work opportunities dried up completely. And when it was time to discuss renewing my contract with the agency, President Miyako asked me, "What do you want to do?"

What could I even do?

I could sing, I could dance, I had youth and a decent face going for me. That was pretty much it. But I was also conscious of the fact that I'd hit an age where the industry no longer saw me as a fresh face. My stylist had swapped out the pinks for more subdued shades like beige and navy blue.

At the same time, I knew that I didn't want to shuffle back to my parents' place. I needed to earn my keep, so I told Miyako-san I wanted to try and get myself a proper job.

She simply said, "Okay." For some reason, her expression seemed a little sad.

That's how it struck me, at least, but what was the reality? I wish I could recall.

After cutting ties with the agency, I spent a while combing through job openings until I eventually snagged a sales position with an internet provider.

It wasn't a simple feat for an ex-idol to step into the workforce. My attempts to join cosmetic and high-end clothing brands failed to pan out. There were moments when I made it to round two of interviews, but the questions often strayed from the job itself. Even I caught onto the fact that it was more about the recruiter's own curiosity.

Outside the glitzy entertainment realm, the treatment of 'celebrities' was a cold and sometimes harsh reality. Their 'former idol' tag does grab attention, but it also gets them conveniently pigeonholed as 'just an idol'. For some people, that label alone is enough to set them on edge, and they don't hold back their snarky remarks: 'You're an idol, but you're not exactly a looker.'

Sorry to disappoint.

Eventually, I got shuffled into sales, probably because my past as an idol made me an intriguing pick.

"If any of your clients happened to be old fans, you might make some good money."

This perception seems to directly affect their personnel choices.

In reality, it appears that many of my peers from the same idol era who moved on from the entertainment scene ended up in sales roles for one reason or another. That's just how it seems to go.

Being an idol sensation doesn't necessarily translate to post-idol life success. If you'd chosen a solid university path, you might've landed a more secure income anyway. Back in my idol days, I managed to stash away a decent sum, but by the time I left that world and dove into the job market, about four years down the line, my funds were dwindling fast. I used to live in a high-rise apartment on the ground floor with a bit of rent relief towards the end. Now I'm tucked away in a suburban one-room flat, paying a hefty 90,000 yen in rent.

I don't bother worrying about how it happened. It just did. Only later did I grasp that's the rhythm of money.

Once more, the fleeting nature of youth hit me. I'd bought that old trench coat back in my idol days. It seemed to hold a glimmer of those days when I felt beautiful, full of youth, and just downright cute. But these days, it's stuffed in the closet, untouched. So, what's stopping me from tossing it out or selling it?

Could it be the weight of unfulfilled wishes?

At times, I find myself envying Ai.

The Ai in my memory remains forever young and stunning.

In my mind, there's no woman in this world that could top Ai. That's what I feel, at least.

But is that perception also just a mirage from memory?

Could this be wishful thinking? Or am I imposing a fantasy on her? Back when I was young, I used to think I'd die before I grew old, or something like that. But here I am, still standing.

Now that I think of it, there's a song I sang once upon a time that feels strangely fitting.

Part 2

I was furious.

It wasn't just the lack of pizzazz in the birthday party announcement image from the other day, or the way all the other members were only half-heartedly committing to learning the

choreography. Don't get me wrong, those things got under my skin too, but they weren't the thing really getting me heated.

It was the fact that my boyfriend had broken up with me. To be exact, it was the way he'd done it that had me seething.

"You're just too much trouble."

That was all he'd had to say for himself. Those were the feelings he'd dredged up from his heart, like the whole relationship had just been an inconvenience.

The backstage room before a live performance. As you bide your time for your makeup session, you're left with two simple choices: burying your head in your phone or indulging in aimless chatter.

"You guys were together for, what, two months?"

"He was totally gutless. Honestly, good riddance." I was busy shoving the other members' belongings to the edge of the makeup desk, giving them an exaggerated push with my elbow.

"I mean, sure, but there are more decent ways to say goodbye. Wouldn't you prefer to end it on a good note?"

"Ugggh, I hate him so much! I swear, I'm chucking all his stuff in the garbage when I get back!"

As I stuffed my personal clothes into my carry on bag I continued ranting to Kanan, one of our newest members, and she dutifully listened while fiddling with her hair – long, black, and meticulously groomed. No matter how energetically she danced, it always looked so silky and sleek. Unfortunately, thanks to all the hairspray our stylist used on her, it was usually pretty crispy to the touch.

She casually toyed with her stiffened bangs, as if trying to loosen them, and threw out a question. "Did you actually do anything to make him think you were too much trouble?"

She'd hit the nail on the head. But my heart wasn't quite in the mood to be accommodating and my brain squeezed out a counter argument I could use to keep playing the victim.

"... the other day, he asked me to meet him on the way home from a live concert in Yokohama. He said he'd made a reservation for some place in Chinatown and when I told him that wasn't doable, he flipped out."

Kanan's gaze drifted towards the far corner of the ceiling. "Ah." Having caught on to the situation, her voice took on a more sympathetic note.

"There would've been a swarm of people from the concert! He didn't even consider that!"

Kanan didn't reply right away. Her thoughtful gaze traced the corner of the ceiling and eventually settled on her own nails. "Maybe it's hard for normal people to grasp."

Her words stopped me in my tracks.

"Normal people", she'd said, with a self-assured little smile that made it clear she didn't count herself among them. Like she was one of the special ones.

The idol group B-Komachi had seen its fair share of member changes. Kanan was the first new addition since the group's inception and in the four years that have slipped by since our formation, seven have joined and five have already moved on. Kanan had spent around a year in a local idol group before it disbanded, and that's when she found her way to us. So she was familiar enough with the idol world to have conversations like this.

As a whole, though, B-Komachi doesn't exactly mesh together well.

And the reason for that is...

"Good morning! ☆"

Slender, graceful limbs, cascading dark hair and eyes radiating confidence, a girl so mature she defied her fourteen years and somehow still radiated a youthful energy. Our undisputed center, Ai breezed into the room.

Kanan immediately fell silent.

It was Ai who was the source of B-Komachi's discord. Management promoted her so blatantly that she'd more or less become the group's face already.

"She wasn't even the first member." the founding members think.

"We don't even get a look in." the newbies think.

Of course, since we were all in this together, we all wanted to get along. There was bullying or talking behind each other's backs that I was aware of. So we just kept our thoughts to ourselves, even if it was unpleasant. It had created an odd tension – though we might get along individually, the atmosphere of the whole group was just a little bit off. But obviously, we always made an effort to appear friendly with each other in any photos we uploaded.

There was no doubt that Ai played a role in the frequent turnover of members, but I couldn't really bring myself to dislike her. I phrase it that way because Ai herself didn't seem all that eager to get along with the other members. She always had a smile on her face and never said

anything that could be taken the wrong way, so being around her wasn't uncomfortable. But her words were always like pre-written lines, rehearsed responses, and polite language, so it was hard to get a sense of her true feelings.

I guess the simplest way to put it is that she always had walls up. It wasn't really a matter of liking or disliking her, because she kept her distance. Sure, there were times when I felt a pang of bitterness for the ways she was being pushed by the management, but, well, that was just how things were.

She really was just that cute.

As for me, I was thankful for Ai for propelling the group forward. From an underground idol group that seemed like an afterthought from a no-named agency, we had managed to break free from the shadows and make it to the big leagues and perform on bigger and better stages. Our activities hadn't changed drastically from our underground days, but thanks to Ai, we were getting more media exposure than ever. In an online survey, the group was ranked as the number one 'idol group that's poised to be the next big hit.'

It felt like we were just at the starting line. I liked it.

Before I knew it, the waiting room had filled with the usual bustling energy that always took over before a live performance.

"I guess I might as well give up on boyfriends for a while..."

I'd mumbled that to myself but Kanan chimed in again.

"That's quite a drastic decision... but it's probably the wisest choice. It would be a catastrophe if you got caught by one of those weekly magazines."

Once again, her response caught me off guard.

"A weekly magazine...? No way. They wouldn't care about me. It'd be a different story if this was some major star, but writing articles about minor players like us won't get any sales."

It wasn't the first time I'd gotten this kind of lecture. But it was always those with a narrow view of the entertainment industry who voiced it. We existed much more on the fringes of that world than our fans imagined, residing in a realm distinct from some of the more prominent stars and we garnered far less attention than our fans seemed to understand.

"Well, you might have a point about the weeklies... but you can't predict what might come our way. After all, we're idols, so it's smarter to keep our relationships low-key," Kanan added.

She was speaking from experience. I knew she'd been dating a famous actor when she was in her previous group. Now, though, she called him a pedophile who was into young girls, and I knew she had her share of regrets about that time.

There were so many adults in the industry who took advantage of the innocence of young girls. There were just as many men who tried to take it further and take advantage of the girls themselves, so it was up to the people around them to protect them from those sorts of relationships. But when a girl who yearns for the adult world finds herself treated as if she's already a part of it, and is indulged with costly, trendy champagne, it's a simple slide into the belief that she might actually belong there.

I'd been much the same way, after all. My ex-boyfriend had been a 24-year-old band member, and I was 18 - that had been just barely acceptable but it still felt like it was pushing the boundaries.

"I just want... a normal romance. That's all."

"I get you."

Idols want to experience romance, just like anyone else.

But when you work with adults, people your age tend to look even more like children by comparison and the agency was ruthless about keeping us as far away from potential suitors as possible. Naturally, it was impossible for us to talk about our love lives with our managers around and opportunities to meet romantic interests were few and far between.

It was why anytime we had a chance to meet a guy, either through a friend's introduction or at a seedy drinking party, we ended up going all in.

The tighter our agency's grip, the more we fight to squeeze out of it. That's just how it goes.

More to the point, most of the men who lurk at those drinking parties are scumbags. They are usually not good to be with.

It's better to lead a life blissfully unaware of how that expensive sparkling wine even tastes.

The stage bathed in a cascade of lights. The low hum of the audience transformed into a round of cheers. One by one, the members bounded onto the stage, met by enthusiastic greetings from their fans.

It all crescendoed when Ai dashed to the center of the stage to join her fellow members.

It was the customary way to kick off the show.

Amongst a sea of multicolored penlights, the red that was Ai's member color dominated the audience, surpassing every other shade. The cheers and the spectrum of penlight colors were brutally candid indicators of popularity. However, there was no longer any point in letting them sway your emotions. Idol culture had a knack for crystal-clear popularity metrics.

Surveying that surge of red from over Ai's shoulder was a little frightening, truth be told.

This wasn't the kind of setting where you could simply bask in the crowd's cheers without a second thought, though. With a twinge of anxiety, I scanned the audience for a glimpse of the familiar yellow glow of my fans' penlights and a sigh of relief slipped from me once I spotted it in the sea of colors.

And then the sound of our singing voices flooded the venue.

Currently, 'B-Komachi' comprised six members. Ai might have gotten the lion's share of the solo parts, but that still beat being stuck in one of those bigger groups where they might have turned off our microphones. In those nearly twenty-member groups, they often wouldn't even bother switching on the microphones for the less famous members.

In many venues, there was a cap on the number of microphones capable of picking up sound - usually topping out at sixteen. In some places, eight microphones were the limit. Most microphone mixers have eight inputs, so the number of microphones that could be used would be a multiple of eight. It was probably deliberate on the part of the management.

Most B-Komachi songs were about love and intense expressions of passion and adoration were casually tossed to the fans on a regular basis. It could feel more than a little awkward to sing songs about romance to the fans I knew were so devoted to me. I didn't consider myself particularly good at promoting that sort of intense romantic fixation and I would've preferred to build a more friendly relationship with my fans. It made me feel guilty to go fishing for those intensely dedicated fans when I had a boyfriend of my own and I was left with mixed feelings whenever I managed to hook them. And it certainly wasn't the sort of thing I felt like singing after being dumped by my boyfriend. Even so, at the climax of the show, I pointed right at those yellow penlights and shouted "I love you!"

I felt a twinge of pain in my heart.

When the performance wrapped, we were ushered out of the back door of the venue by car and I was dropped off at a station in a neighboring town where it was only a thirty minute train ride home.

Even idols take the train.

On a day like this, though, my ordinary commute seemed like such a tiresome chore. With nothing else to occupy me, my mind went back to my ex-boyfriend. I wanted to try and clear my head and a brisk walk in the chilly air seemed like a good enough solution.

There was a park behind the station and I found myself a bench there where I could sit and gaze up at the beautiful half moon hanging in the sky as I went over my thoughts. Unfortunately, I was the type who did my best thinking when I had someone I could pour my feelings out to. In reality, I was a lonely and anxious person, always insecure, always needing praise and acknowledgement, and the easiest way to deal with these feelings was to find a lover.

I'd often wondered to myself why I got so much more comfort from complaining to the opposite sex as opposed to my own, but I'd never come up with an answer.

It was starting to seem that I was the sort of person who couldn't protect her own heart without a lover by her side. Even though I'd just sworn off boyfriends for a while, I was still wondering to myself whether or not there was a guy for me out there. Maybe I'm not really suited to being an idol in the first place. I'd spend nights with my boyfriend then be out on stage the next day shouting "I love you!" to my fans.

That's treachery. And before I became an idol, I hated idols like that the most, but I just couldn't help myself. Maybe I was just naturally drawn to men.

Even if I fell in love with one of my fans, there was no way I could get away with having a fan as my lover.

So then, who's left to hold me close?

How am I supposed to fill this horrible void in my heart?

As I was churning these depressing thoughts around in my head, an unexpected call broke through the currents.

"Hey!"

I glanced over to the voice – cheery and somehow clinical in equal measure. There stood a girl, backlit by the lights of the park and clutching a fast food bag that clashed with her pretty face.

"Ai...chan?"

"What're you doing here?"

I was completely stunned. I'd never imagined that I'd run into Ai, the centre of B-Komachi in a place like this. In contrast to my bewilderment, Ai carried herself as if nothing about our encounter was the slightest bit unusual.

"That's my line!" I spluttered.

"I was just grabbing a bite to eat." The park lights illuminated her from behind and I found myself irked by how matter-of-fact she was being. "But there's no restaurants around where I live, so I figured I'd grab a burger from the station and eat it at home."

Casually as anything, Ai reached into the paper bag, discarded the yellow wrapping paper by crumpling it in her fist, and then tossed it back into the bag for disposal. Then, grabbing the burger with her bare hands, she took a huge bite. Her total lack of manners was impossible to ignore.

"Then why not go home and eat it?"

My mixed feelings of annoyance and embarrassment made me blurt something out and even though our eyes met briefly, Ai didn't miss a beat.

"That was the plan. But once I had it in my hands, I couldn't resist digging in. Who wants a cold burger, right? I was strolling around, hunting for a decent spot to sit and eat, and that's when I spotted this girl with a seriously sour expression. Took me a moment to realize it was one of our members."

Could it be that Ai came over just to chat because she was genuinely concerned about me?

"...was I really looking that gloomy?"

"Yup. You had that 'end of the world' vibe going."

"You were worried about me."

Ai kept chewing her burger and flashed a smile, though she avoided my gaze. "Heehee."

I don't get her at all.

Could she really have just come over on a whim? I studied her face while she kept munching away, and I ended up concluding that it was probably the case.

Her pinky finger was smeared with ketchup, and a couple of onions had dropped onto the ground as she tackled her meal. And yet, it didn't strike me as messy or uncouth. Something about it seemed oddly innocent and pure. Of course, if it were me doing the same thing, of course, people would come away with a totally different impression.

But it kept nagging at me, so I finally spoke up. "You don't have to toss the burger wrapper. The part you hold in your hand stays wrapped in paper..."

Ai lowered her gaze to the burger, seemed to ponder for a second, and then mumbled, "Oh, so it does..." Her face lit up with genuine understanding as she peered back into the paper bag.

Ai's kind of in her own world sometimes. Sometimes it's like she's missing common sense in the most absurd places. Schedules slip her mind and people's names and faces just vanish. Honestly, she's the kind who'd find it a tad tough to fit into the normal rhythm of the real world. But instead of dismissing her as "scatterbrained," everyone takes it as a sign that she's some sort of genius. I bet if Leonardo da Vinci were here today, we'd be giving him the same treatment.

The sight of Ai licking the ketchup off her pinky finger was oddly captivating.

"So..." Ai studied my face for a moment, as if contemplating something. But then, as if giving up on it, she breezed on. "What's got you wearing such a gloomy expression?"

... She must have been trying to remember my name. But it seemed like she couldn't quite recall it, or maybe she did remember but wasn't entirely certain if it was right. Ever since she got reprimanded for mixing up crew members' names on production sites, Ai has developed this habit of avoiding using people's names. Instead of risking getting a name wrong, she ends up skirting around it and not using names at all.

I get that Ai is just like that. I kept my gaze steady, as if I hadn't caught her slip. Apparently, she can remember the names of those who are particularly close to her, but I'm not in that category. Our relationship isn't like that.

Her gaze stayed fixed on me.

Our impromptu meeting in the park probably had something to do with her curiosity. I'm pretty sure that if this were an everyday situation, like backstage at a regular live music club, things wouldn't play out like this. That's where Ai and I stand. But precisely because of that, there are things I can share with her and only her.

"You promise you won't tell anyone?"

Ai gives me an adorable little head tilt in response to my words. "I can't give you a definite yes or no on that. But I like to think I'm pretty good at keeping things to myself. I generally avoid saying things that don't really need to be said."

It's a fact that I've never caught Ai gossiping about anyone. Although, I can't tell if it's because she's genuinely discreet or if she simply isn't all that invested in other people's business.

"So? Is it an interesting story?" she prompted me, as if she were genuinely intrigued.

"No, not really. It's just that I broke up with my boyfriend."

Ai's expression remained unchanged. "Oh, that's..."

She knit her brows and brought her hands together, as if to say "sorry for your loss". It was hard to tell if she was teasing me or being sincere. Perhaps in response to my resulting scowl, Ai set the paper bag down on the bench beside her and turned to me, her gaze direct and focused.

"Did you love him?"

That was a bit of an odd question. Since we'd been dating to begin with, a normal response might be, "You must've really cared about him." But coming from Ai, it felt like she was getting at something deeper.

A train rumbled past the park. Amidst the clamor, I felt it wasn't the right moment to answer, so I let the noise linger and stayed silent for a while. Ai seemed to pick up on the mood as well and turned her gaze towards the caution signs scattered around the park.

In those few seconds before the train's noise subsided, I grappled with how to respond to her question. In the heat of the breakup, my anger had been the strongest emotion, but now I had the opportunity to gather my thoughts properly.

The train's rattle gradually faded away. After a few beats of quiet, I responded, almost to myself.

"...I guess so. Yeah. I think I loved him."

As the words left my lips, a wave of sorrow washed over me. Funny how anger often covers up the sadness we don't want to face.

Even cats lash out with their claws when they're upset.

"I see," Ai's expression held steady. "Does it hurt? Probably. I guess it must do."

Her brows were still furrowed but I could tell now that she wasn't making fun of me. It was clear she was genuinely troubled by not knowing how to respond but her words weren't an expression of sympathy – it's more like she was asking for confirmation. Just as she's not that great at remembering people's names, she's probably not that confident in figuring out what's going on in people's hearts.

"Sorry." she continued. "I don't know how to console you in a situation like this... I don't really have anything clever to say."

I breathed out a laugh. That was more or less the reaction I'd expected from Ai. It was the only reason I'd told her in the first place.

In the presence of an exceptional human, there are typically two reactions. Some people view them as rivals and strive to outdo them. Others try to adapt and connect with them.

So, where did I fit in?

Probably neither. I had simply decided not to view Ai as a human being to begin with.

Once a person like me gets jealous, I can't help but develop an intense loathing for the object of my envy.

It's draining, and I'm well aware of it.

Back when I used to play the piano, during competitions, whether I managed to snag a prize or not, I would feel this immense envy for those who played better than me. There seemed to be people with more natural talent than me everywhere, and I was driven by this burning desire to outdo them, no matter what.

Ironically, I wasn't even putting in that much effort so I'm certain those who outshone me were probably enduring an even more demanding struggle. Still, I had a deep love for music. Even though I lacked the resolve to turn it into my profession, I clung to this idol career as a way to escape the cutthroat competition I had experienced before. I've already come to terms with the fact that I'm not someone destined for the top.

So I'm not envious of Ai being the driving force behind B-Komachi's success. She's simply not cut from the same cloth as normal humans like me. That's why I felt comfortable confiding in Ai — it was like venting to my cat or sending a prayer to the heavens. I knew she'd never retort with phrases like, "As an idol, you shouldn't be dating," or "There's something off about your character." In that way, Ai wasn't your typical person.

That's exactly why I could tell her things I could never bring up with my real friends.

"It really sucks."

"I see."

Ai's gaze is direct. But I'm not looking for her sympathy.

"Getting dumped sucks! Nobody appreciates how hard my job is! I hate myself for trying to rely on guys! I love my fans but they don't hug me or give me a pat on the head! I hate myself for thinking there's no point in loving my fans and I hate myself for betraying them! I'm sick of

feeling guilty! 'Idols shouldn't date'? Give me a break, that's bullshit! But I'm scared that if I say that, someone will just tell me 'if you can't handle it, just quit!"

All my bottled-up feelings exploding out like a dam breaking. But Ai's expression stayed the same. She just watched as I kept on letting it all out.

"I'm so sick of living with my parents! The walls and floors are paper thin and I can't practice at night! My stupid brother is a shut in, but I'm the one my parents are nagging about employment! I hate the new color I dyed my hair and I hate how cold our boxed lunches always are! My follower count is stuck in a rut and the announcement image for my birthday festival is beyond tacky! I didn't win tickets to see my fave and it's killing me! I haven't been getting any sleep! I hope all the train gropers just die already! My smartphone screen cracked again and it's the third goddamn time this year! The air freshener I bought yesterday smells like Grandpa's house and it's driving me insane! I'm broke but my brother keeps hassling me for money! I'm sick of the guys who send dick pics on social media! I'm sick of attention-seekers in my livestream chats! People who think I want to hear their advice should keep it to themselves! I wish I'd just gone to college! My stupid brother's noisy games piss me off so much! My stupid classmates who spread my personal info piss me off so much! I bought an expensive bracelet and now I have no idea where it is! I can't believe I got dumped right before Christmas!"

It's hard, right?

"Aaaaaahhh, I'm so done with life!!!!"

Ai looked at me blankly. It was a face that I'd never seen on her before.

"... Sounds tough," she eventually replied.

I smirked, like I'd just scored a point. I caught Ai off guard, managed to surprise her, and that expression was my trophy. "It is tough. Just a regular person, facing everyday struggles, like everyone else."

Not a superstar. Not some idol. Being an idol while living an everyday life, my challenges were as real as anybody else's.

"But thanks. I feel a bit better after venting like that."

Ai looked straight at me. "Well, if that's the case..."

She seemed like she was about to say something, her mouth slightly open, her gaze shifting up and away from me. Seeing that, I couldn't help but smirk again. It was the first time I had seen Ai flustered. Is that what it looks like when an invincible girl loses her cool?

"Life is full of ups and downs, huh..."

That was all Ai could find it in herself to wring out. A colorless platitude.

I sighed and stretched out my arms as if I'd just finished a tough task. "Aah, I could really use a break."

"Why?"

I'd have figured wanting a break was as universal as it comes, but does she really not get it?

"Were you not listening? None of those reasons seemed good enough to you?" Ai seemed unconvinced, so I dug deep into my emotions for the core reason. "Performing on stage lately has been pretty bad for my mental health."

Ai met my gaze in silence. I pressed on.

"Even when I'm in a foul mood like this, I have to sing songs that sound bright and happy. I might've gotten used to it, but having to act so disconnected from how you really feel wears down on you eventually. It makes me feel like I'm gradually turning into a robot. I'm getting so used to lying that I've gotten totally desensitized to it, like I'm becoming a liar in mind, body and heart."

Even idols have to look out for their mental health. I was living in the narrow space afforded to me by other people's desires and aspirations and it was excruciating.

"Is that so?" Ai said. "I don't really know what that feels like."

"You're pretty strong then, huh?" I sniped in return. "You never have times where things are tough and you hate being on stage?"

My biting response seemed to silence her. That, or she didn't have a response to begin with.

"Guess not. Looks like Ai-chan's invincible."

I swallowed the rest of my remark: 'It's not like anything ever resonates with you.'

I didn't know whether any of my words were hitting her where it hurt but when she finally responded, she was gazing up at the clouds and tracing their path across the night sky as they went.

"I'm not invincible. Life gets to me just like anyone else. To be honest, I'm pretty down at the moment."

It was hard to believe that when her face was just as nonchalant as ever and she didn't miss a beat as she finally met my gaze again.

"You know I grew up in a children's home without my parents, right?"

I did. She'd mentioned it in such an off-hand manner that it hadn't really stuck out in my mind.

"Well, it's coming up on the time I have to leave. My mother's relatives said they'd look after me but when we finally met, they turned me away."

This time, I was the one who was silenced.

"I wonder what went wrong... They didn't give me a reason, so I've been wondering. Maybe they didn't like how much I look like my mother? Or maybe they didn't like my personality? Or maybe they didn't approve of me being an idol?"

At last, I managed to get a word in edgeways. "It's really left you out of sorts, hasn't it?"

I was surprised. Both to hear that the invincible Ai was in such a horrible situation and that she was opening up to me about it.

"When did this all happen?"

"The day before yesterday."

And she still went up on stage like always, as if nothing had happened.

She really was something else altogether.

I let out a sigh. "You really are amazing, Ai."

My whole body was protesting the effort it was taking to try and understand this girl.

"Well... when I feel a little down, I start saying that I don't want to be on stage... Maybe I'm just not cut out for it."

Ai responded with a nonchalant gesture and I couldn't quite grasp what she meant.

"Maybe it's that. Or maybe you're just too honest."

Too honest? I couldn't work out what she was getting at.

"What do you mean?" My confusion was sincere.

"Because I'm a natural born liar."

Her voice was stunningly matter-of-fact.

"The "idol" Ai is pretty much the complete opposite of who I really am, but... she's the person I'd like to be. For me, being an idol is about working towards my ideal self. Since I was already a liar to begin with, telling lies on stage doesn't make any difference to me."

Everyone has their own take on what it means to be an idol, but Ai's was strikingly different. This was her perspective.

"Even lies can turn true when you tell them enough times. Like, when you sing a cheerful song, doesn't it make you feel a little more cheerful too? It's like that, I guess. So, the me on that stage is the end goal that I'm aiming for."

Her smile had always been fabricated.

"That's what I'm striving for... but I'm still a work in progress. Becoming a girl who's pretty, kind, invincible... who loves everyone and everyone loves in return... it's not easy, you know? But it's the kind of person I really want to be."

Her words seemed sincere enough, but something about them rung hollow as well.

"We're running on completely different mindsets, then. That's not the kind of idol I am." It was as inoffensive a reply as I could manage. To be honest, I had no idea what I was hearing. I couldn't tell if she was actually talking spontaneously or if these words were somehow rehearsed. Maybe this is what it takes to be the sort of girl management would favour.

Ai flashed me a smile. "Maybe not. And hey! Maybe it's not even worth getting that worked up about. I mean, it's only work, right? We're just idols."

"Just idols..." Coming from anyone else, that might have sounded spiteful or dismissive of the job but I couldn't detect any underhanded resentment from Ai at all. "I'm not like you, though. I've got nothing to bring to the table.."

"Huh? Didn't you mention once you'd been playing piano since you were little? That's not nothing."

'Learning to play piano' ranks pretty high on a lot of kids' wishlists. I'd been one of them but I hadn't even turned out good enough to play for the school choir competition so it wasn't exactly something I was in a position to brag about. "A lot of people pick it up and leave it behind. I'm nothing special."

"Is that so? Talented people are always coming out with that 'I'm nothing special' stuff but it sounds to me like you just set the bar way too high for yourself. If you can do it, it's a waste not to."

It was like getting career advice from one of my teachers all over again.

"Didn't Mei-chan write the lyrics to our song from the other day?" She pointed her finger right at my nose. "Why don't you do the same thing?"

"What... write lyrics? Me?" I felt my eyebrows curl up in a frown. Her counterattack had swerved in from an unexpected direction.

"Yeah! And compose a song for them, too. Why not give it a try?"

"It's not that I can't, but... I mean, I've dabbled a little here and there but that was just playing around."

"There's no such thing as just playing around! Even if it's just a rough draft, I bet the arranger would be able to really get it into shape."

"I'm telling you, there's no way..."

The thought of giving up and just walking away to escape the conversation crossed my mind. But it seemed like Ai was enjoying herself – her voice had brightened considerably.

"How come?"

'How come', she says. Was she really that bad at picking up other people's feelings? Maybe her ability to empathize with others was completely out of order. Even if that were the case, I was pretty sure that only I could truly grasp the feelings I was wrestling with right now.

"Because... it's embarrassing."

Ai gave me a blank look.

"That's it?"

Had she been conjuring some elaborate explanation? Someone who can make music doesn't just drop it for no reason. Maybe it seems like there should be some profound revelation behind it, but that's not how it always works.

"Exactly! If I suddenly start spouting, 'Oh, I used to play music!' out of nowhere, it's like... Don't I sound super pretentious? Or like I'm scrambling for something to make me stand out? The

smartest move to avoid stirring up haters is to steer clear of anything new! Just stick to the mold you've laid out from the start, and stay safe within the boundaries you've set for yourself!"

"Really..? It just sounds to me like you're overthinking it. It doesn't make you seem pretentious, and I'm sure your fans would support you. There's really nothing to be embarrassed about."

"Mrghgh..."

Annoyingly enough, she was making sense. Deep down, it wasn't just embarrassment that was holding me back. It was this irrational fear of baring my immaturity and stumbling hard. I had hoped that Ai would get why I had held back all this time, but instead, she was poking and prodding at this sore spot relentlessly.

It wasn't the first time I'd been given a lecture like this. Usually, I'd just plaster on a polite smile and let it slide. But now, with Ai of all people chiming in... a small part of me began to entertain the idea of giving it a shot.

"Then... if I composed something, would you write the lyrics for me, Ai?"

Counterattack. I guess this is what they mean when they say "if I'm going down, I'm taking you with me!"

"Huh...?"

I couldn't help but grin mischievously as I set my hands on Ai's shoulders. "You've got such a unique sense of style. I bet you could come up with some amazing lyrics, don't you think?"

That was the real goal here. It seemed like a no-brainer that Ai, who was anything but ordinary, would come up with some extraordinary lyrics.

"I, um... can't. Heehee."

This might have been the first time I'd ever seen Ai genuinely embarrassed.

"I mean, I'm only a middle school graduate, so I'm not exactly a genius, and my Japanese is pretty shaky..."

"Weren't you the one who said not to be embarrassed? You can't change your tune just because we're talking about you now! I'm really curious to see what kind of lyrics you'd come up with!"

I was being more than a little mean, poking and prodding at her like this. Let's see how you like it when the tables are turned! And though I was really only teasing her, Ai seemed to be taking it seriously.

After a moment, she finally spoke up.

"... really?"

"Mhm. Really."

As I said it, I felt sure that I really did mean it

"But, um... writing lyrics that actually match the song sounds a little too hard for me..."

"Then we'll just start with the lyrics. And I can just come up with a melody to go with them."

"Then, um..."

We lingered in that park, gently illuminated by the moon and the streetlights. The two of us had never been particularly close, but...

For just that single moment, it felt like we were classmates in school, chattering away about our future together, like we were friends.

Part 3

I don't think I'll ever forget that particular interview with Ai in one of those fashion magazines.

"Q: Which member are you closest to?"

The answer she gave was my name.

The one and only time I had a particularly deep conversation with Ai - the one time we had ever really talked, period - had been that night. Did it just happen to pop into her mind when she was asked? Or was Ai so isolated within B-Komachi that just one conversation like that on one single day was enough for me to land the number one spot?

A few days after that fateful night, Ai came to me with the lyrics. In all honesty, I hadn't actually expected her to write them – it'd been a passing conversation and that was it. She handed me a notebook with the words "LYRIC BOOK" written in chunky magic marker on the cover, wearing such an adorably anxious expression that she looked for that moment like any other fourteen year-old girl.

When I got home and cracked open the notebook, I was greeted with a flood of carefully penned lines, occasionally marred by eraser marks. I'd only asked for one set of lyrics, but there were pages upon pages filled with all sorts of ideas. It seemed like she'd taken it pretty seriously.

At the outset, there were the typical idol-esque lyrics—mention of cake cravings and world peace aspirations. It was clear that there had been a lot of trial and error at play. But with every page, I could see the lyrics growing more and more refined until I found myself stopping on a set titled "Lying Me."

In sharp contrast to the unsettling title, the lyrics were bursting with optimism and good cheer.

Optimism and good cheer... I guess those things are all lies for Ai. The truth is that she's in pain and suffering, to the extent that even writing lyrics like this makes her a liar.

That was the kind of message I could sense.

I set my smartphone to record and took a seat at my piano. I had zero clue about how the pros went about composing music, so I didn't bother with any of the fancy stuff. I just let it flow, the piano melody and the guiding vocals falling into place alongside Ai's lyrics. Back then, I was still struggling with my own feelings of melancholy. I knew that many of my fans were probably wrestling with their own sadness or frustrations.

To everyone feeling beaten down by their family life, relationships, or jobs. I hope that, even if it's just for a moment, this song might lift your spirits. I wanted to play a tune that was lively and filled with joy. From miserable me, to miserable you. That was the feeling I had in mind when I wrote it.

The song found its place on the B-side of a certain single by B-Komachi. It didn't gain much popularity and we never really revisited it.

Yet, it's a song that, even at the age of 35, I find myself humming on nights like these.